

LOCAL CHURCH

THE LOCAL CHURCH ADVANTAGE

by Dr. John C. Whitcomb

The Great Commission of our Lord to His Church included this overwhelming assignment: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). This can mean nothing less than the entire Bible, because our Lord’s recorded words in the four Gospels can only be understood in their fullness when we compare them with previous revelation in the OT and later revelation in the NT. Thus, the apostle Paul told us that even the basic truth of the death and resurrection of Christ can be understood only in light of “the Scriptures” (1 Cor.15:3-4).

But how can the Church accomplish this enormous task in this age? Obviously no Christian, not even the most experienced pastor or teacher, will ever be able to say, “I have totally mastered the Word of God.” Nevertheless, that must be our constant goal if we are to honor our Lord’s commandment.

As we study the NT, we soon discover that God’s means for accomplishing this goal is the local church. In the early centuries of church history there were no parachurch training institutions such as Bible colleges, Christian liberal arts colleges, or theological seminaries. Yet, somehow, there seemed to be no lack of godly, mature, biblically knowledgeable pastors and teachers. Today, by contrast, the multiplication of extremely expensive and impressive institutions of high academic learning is often paralleled by theologically and spiritually weak churches. Is there a reason for this tragic dilemma?

I believe that the basic problem exists in the minds and hearts of pastors and congregations. In our culture today, it is expected of pastors to be professionally trained and skilled in the latest techniques of church growth, outreach, administration, fund-raising, property development, etc., instead of the one thing that is needful above everything else, namely, teaching “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). This is also known as “the 2 Timothy 2:2 principle,” and is simply an extension of our Lord’s Great Commission to His people, done with all diligence, dedication, and determination in the Holy Spirit.

The fundamental question, then, is this: **HOW CAN A LOCAL CHURCH (WITH ALL OF ITS APPARENT LIMITATIONS) “THOROUGHLY EQUIP” THE “MAN OF GOD” FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY** (2 Tim. 3:17)?

Obviously, the pastor and the congregation have a heavy decision to make at this point. They can (1) abdicate their responsibility before God and send their disciples hundreds or even thousands of miles away for “experts” to train; or (2) trust the Lord for special wisdom, grace, and patience to train their disciples to understand the whole spectrum of revealed truth as they themselves have been taught by godly mentors.

There will be legitimate exceptions to these guidelines. Parents who home-school, for example, often take advantage of opportunities to connect their children with the children of other families and to experience first hand the glory of God in the entire created world. But the final interpretation of these realities must remain with Dad and Mom. To say the least, this can and will be a stretching experience for parents!

The same is true for the local church. The church does not surrender its sovereignty and independence when it decides on the character, quality, and extent of outside help to be used. Instead of turning all such decisions over to distant educators, the congregation must trust the Lord for His help and guidance in selecting appropriate training materials. Sunday Schools and adult Bible fellowships have been doing this for many years very effectively. But how can pastors and teachers be trained in local churches, even through the post-graduate levels of theological competence?

This is the area of greatest tension today. Churches are often intimidated by prestigious theological seminaries with this kind of challenge: “Who do you have in your church that has the competence to train men to understand the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT? You must send them to us for specialized training in the original languages.” That seems very logical. But what

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else will these local church disciples learn during the years they are separated from “home base”? They will frequently become spiritually arrogant and complacent, imagining that they really don’t need the love, discipline, and accountability that God designed the local church to provide. They will all too often learn various perspectives of theology, hermeneutics, ethics, counseling, and Christian living and ministry that are not in harmony with the Word of God, and that contradict what their home church believes and teaches. At the same time, the church is expected to heavily subsidize such schools while having almost no control or input. Finally, at the end of the years, the disciple graduates but is all-too-often ineffective in the church, having lost something of his original zeal, theological convictions, spiritual power, love for people, and even the former strength of his marriage.

I am not writing these words from the realm of mere speculation. For over thirty-eight years I taught in a theologically conservative seminary, and I became increasingly alarmed at the apparent self-sufficiency and academic pride of many of my colleagues. Accountability to godly pastors and people did not seem to be a high priority. As I look back over the years, I must report with great sadness that the majority of my academically brilliant colleagues experienced moral and/or theological deterioration and left the school.

God’s way is not man’s way. And God’s way is not generally the easy way. The Early Church knew this; and, to some extent, so did the Reformers, the Puritans, and great expository preachers such as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, none of whom had ‘advanced’ seminary training. It is not our purpose to disparage all theological training outside of the local church, for some of it has been quite effective. Rather, it is our deep desire to call God’s people to return to the original plan and blueprint and divine provisions for training Spirit-filled leaders as spelled out in the infallible, inerrant, and inspired Word of God. To members of small, struggling congregations, theological seminaries seem to be the final answer for training future leaders. However, the incomparable advantage of the local church, after all, is that it is the only institution and program on earth that Christ

promised to build (Matt. 16:18). God’s people must return to the original blueprint He has revealed to us, and to the original foundation, which is Christ Himself. Surely, without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5); but with Him all things are possible (Matt. 19:26)—even the training of godly pastors within the context of the local church or, in some cases, a close network of local churches in a specific region.

One means God is providing to assist local churches in their long-range, in-depth discipleship programs is video-audio taped courses in Bible and Christian

Theology. The Christian Workman Schools of Theology, with which I am most familiar, are designed to provide opportunity for spiritual health and growth within the local church where the student will be better known, loved, confronted, and prayed for. As he learns God’s Word systematically, he can more effectively learn to implement biblical teachings through various levels of service within the church and the community where God has providentially placed him and his family.

One inevitable question will be asked: How can such a program be accredited? The answer is that no theological training program can be legitimately accredited by a secular agency, or an agency that is not in

basic harmony with the local church’s understanding of God’s Word. Each local church, however, has (or should have) concentric circles of identification and recognition which can “accredit” the graduates of its training program. Ultimately, of course, programs such as the CWST can only be accredited by God Himself, as the Scriptures are faithfully, accurately, and effectively taught for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many fundamental and evangelical church fellowships are rethinking this major challenge of long-term discipleship and are trusting the Lord for His guidance in returning to NT basics. ■

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